CHAPTER V

A FEMALE POWERHOUSE
A FEMALE POWER HOUSE

Of the contemporary American novelists, especially the later part of the twentieth century, Oates occupies a significant place. She is a writer committed to the contemporary themes. She is a "social novelist of a peculiar kind" (Alfred Kazin, P.198). She has an uncanny ability to give a cinematic vision of America. Oates absorbs and transmits in her fiction the terror, which is often a part of living in America. Oates portrays an instructive and terrifying vision of America. She does not preach but shows people the unpleasant truth prevailing in America and her novels are fiercely claustrophobic. Oates presents an incomplete and tragic vision of life in her novels. Oates is more open to social turmoil and the frightening American life. She has an instinct for the exploding social menace in Detroit. Detroit is dangerous; its streets are "unflowery"; autumn has no effect on it. It is a "hole with a horizon." Jules could "smell Detroit... a kind of stretched-out hole." All that is ugly and brutal and impersonal is Detroit. Free-spirited Jules yearns for something else. After he
takes a job delivering flowers, he reflects on the incongruity of flowers in the streets of Detroit. Yet, when he makes deliveries in Grosse Pointe where flowers are more congruous with the setting, a maid sees in him the “hungry look of a city boy.” If flowers do not belong to Detroit, Jules, the florist delivery boy, does not belong to Grosse Pointe.

Ultimately the image of Detroit in Oates’ fiction is the city of death, the place where human beings are killed and the human spirit dies. “Lots of people die,” Jules remarks, “and in strange ways in Detroit...” (them, 271). People are gunned down in the streets of the city, but in Grosse Pointe, he ponders, they die “in hospitals, waited upon.” Throughout the novel the contrast between the metropolitan jungle and the suburban garden is constantly invoked. Whether it is to wealthy Grosse Pointe or to middle-class Dearborn, to escape to the suburbs is to get free from the inevitable destruction of the urban setting. Jules’ romantic dreams of a flight to California to the golden West are paralleled in his sister’s escape to Dearborn – ironically, however, when he pays his final visit to Maureen, he warns her that Dearborn can burn as
well as Detroit – never admitting that the Los Angeles is potentially destructible and destructive, too.

Detroit is “always Detroit”; there is something unchangeable and tragically unredeemable about the city in them. Vinoba Bhave’s refrain “fire burns and does its duty” (*them* 105, 503) which intrigues Jules from the day he reads it in the waiting room of the clinic, contains a hint of the phoenix image: the city can be purged by fire only if it is to rise from the smoldering ruins as a new city with a new life. While Jules insists on “fires (which) will never be put out” his associate, Dr. Mort Piercy, dreams more Utopian dreams of society living in harmony, a city of peace, acknowledging that “society must be leveled before a new, beautiful, peaceful society can be erected” (*them* 501-2). Together, Jules and Mort set out of Los Angeles and Jules’s lifelong desire to go to the West becomes a reality.

She presents the sheer rich chaos of American life, which staggers armies of the poor and outraged. Oates criticizes the society in her novels. She does not criticize the city alone in her novels, she criticizes the faults in the society. Oates’ portrait of the city is thoroughly consistent with the American experience.
Hopeful expectation yields to crippling despair. The city harbors brutal men and dashes dreams to nothingness. It brings out the worst in men. Cities are dark, dirty and menacing. Only those too strong that they cannot be destroyed by it can only survive. The sensitive, the gentle, the weak are destroyed. Yet there is a strange attraction about the city; people return to it again and again searching and hoping for community. There is clear depiction of cities in Joyce Carol Oates’ works, the subtle but unmistakable suggestion that ultimately the city cannot be escaped. Therefore, if man is to survive in the city, he must be capable of redeeming it. Oates carefully identifies and analyzes three causes for the lack of community in the city: mobility, which creates a “nation of strangers,” a lack of personal identity, which can only generate alienation, and the absence of any connecting ties with other human beings, which reinforces the feelings of anomie.

The degrading life of the migrants is brought into focus in *A Garden of Earthly Delights*. The defects in their social class are also clearly pointed out. According to Oates, any society whether rural or urban, high or low has tragedy and violence in them, since the man who inhabits it is the same whether civilized or
uncivilized. There is a reversal of this in *A Garden of Earthly Delights* where Clara who is from the lower strata of the society exploits the Reveres. She destroys the Reveres for her secure future though she never gains it in the end.

Oates works gained importance because of her quality of thought, which produced works in qualitative forms. The issues she focuses are socially relevant and politically significant. The social bewilderment and confusion are partly social and partly political. A nation wedded to the principle of freedom has failed to inculcate in its people, the value of it and the ideal of living in it. The social evils that prevail in the society is due to failure on the part of the social scientists and to the lack of rules to take corrective measures to curb the violence, taking place in every sphere of human activity, whether, it is within the family or in the society.

Oates is a powerful advocate of human values and endurance. She is a novelist of strong intellectual force that America has witnessed in this part of the century. Her characters are vividly drawn from living organism of the social structure. There are a few priors to Oates, like Steinberg, who tried to focus
the inherent social evils in America. Those who attempted to deal with this exercise at large have been found themselves forced into selective and reductive generalization with a piecemeal criticism of the existing social lacuna. But Oates does not choose that kind of trodden path. She wants to focus the social evils, in the American Society.

Oates’ characters are involved with various American socio-cultural institutions and become part of human malevolence and tragedy. Horror, gloom and mysterious and violent incidents have become the daily routine in American social order and the trilogy mirrors them. The game she chooses, addresses well her desire to focus on the darker aspects of the human condition that too in a most civilized and progressive American society. Oates’ portrayal of fictional truths merges with those truths themselves, enacting an effect of higher seriousness, which makes her works unique in the American fiction of the twentieth century. Mostly her characters are drawn from uneducated part of the society. They are psychologically flawed and live in pent up wrath and they are inarticulate, they explode into orgy of violence. Oates, creates them with an urgency that they matter and more so their attitude
matters. They will have to be changed. To change them and bring them out of the quagmire, their actions are mirrored by her. It is a corrective device of her medium.

Oates herself once in her essay titled "Why is your Writing So Violent?" pointed out that "serious writers, as distinct from entertainers or propagandists, take for their natural subjects the complexity of the world, its evils as well as its goods. The serious writer, after all, bears witness."¹

In other words, it is a vibrating human experience, she pictures in her trilogy as well as in other novels. Her characters are unfortunately suffering from psychological and spiritual isolation. They are blinded to the communal consciousness and mutual co-existence.

Her intention is to bring out the American social order enmeshed in chaos to sanity and sensibility. She wants transformation. She expects an evolution into a higher humanism. As an artist, Oates thinks that it is her bounden duty to dramatize the nightmarish conditions of the present American social conditions with all its anxiety, dislocation and explosive conflict.
Her character portrayals are all representative types. At the individual level she wants to integrate reason and emotion so that one can discern the socio-cultural values.

Oates’ characters are defined in terms of their capabilities to resolve their crises in which they are placed. Oates’ characters are deflated when they have unattainable needs and try to escape the world in which they are born. Through their defeat Oates stresses the fact that the world into which they are born must be accepted and respected. A Garden of Earthly Delights for instance stresses this point. In her novels Oates insists the fact that society provides boundaries for existence and knowledge that cannot be crossed and if the characters cross, the result would be chaos, madness or death. Oates presents the tragic vision of life through the destruction of simple people and the sad fact of their not realizing it and their inability in resisting their destruction.

The reason for the tragic destruction of her characters is their own lack of self-identity and self-fulfilment. The isolated self is connected with violence, retreat, defenselessness and brittleness. The power in Oates’ fiction is the obsessive concentration on the
ever-present insecurity and violence, which lie buried in the psyche of man and which mould their lives.

The landscapes and modes of life she treats are as diverse as the formal strategies she has employed in drawing them. Her range is wide from rural, urban and suburban America of the present as well as the past centuries spanning a century, which encapsulates the whole ambit of American social structure. She has taken in farming migrant workers, science and violence. Her genre is a powerful thematic one to look at masculine as well as feminine issues involving their life problems. Fiction imitation today according to Oates which she states while accepting the National Book Award for the novel, them. "Sometimes seems an exercises in stubbornness and anachronistic gesture that goes against the thrill demands of the age – that only present has the meaning, that the contemplative life is irrelevant, that only the life of the purest sensation is divine, and that the act of giving shape to sensation, of giving permanence to the present, is somehow an inversion of the life principle itself."

Oates strongly believes in the objective of fiction. It has to have a purpose. It has to create awareness in the society.
According to her the "power of narrative fiction is to give coherence to fumbled experience and to bring about a change of heart." ³

Oates may not be ahead of the people she writes about. Since her prime concern is to see people in the terms they present themselves, she is able to present consciousness as a person. The human mind, as she says in the title of a recent novel, is simply -- "Wonderland." And the significance of that "Wonderland" to the social melodrama that is America today is that they collide but do not connect. It is in disintegration. It lives between the divided self and ego.

Once Oates made an observation on The Dollmaker, written by Harriette Arnow:

"It seems to me that the greatest works of literature deal with the human soul caught in the stampede of time, unable to gauge the profundity of what passes over it, like the character of Yeats who live through terrifying events but who cannot understand them; in this way history passes over most of us. Society is caught in a convulsion, whether of growth or of death, and ordinary people are
destroyed. They do not, however, understand that they are ‘destroyed.’ This is what American social situation today is. What Oates pictures is micro level of the social structure of the United States.”

Oates’ characters move through a world that seems to be wholly physical and even full of global eruptions, yet the violence is in their own heads. It is due to a vacuum created in their minds regarding their place in the social order. They touch us by frightening us like ‘disembodied souls calling to us from other world.’ They live through terrifying events but cannot understand them. This is what makes Oates an element in the modern American fiction, involuntarily disturbing. She takes the convulsion of society for granted. *GED.* begins with the birth on the highway of a migrant worker’s child after the truck transporting the workers has been in a collision. Obviously she is unlike many women writers, in her feeling for the pressure, mass, density of violence in American experience not always ushered by the professional middle class. ‘The greatest realities’ Oates once said, ‘are physical and economic; all the subtleties of life come afterward.’ Yet the central significance in her work is the teeming
private consciousness, a ‘Wonderland’ that’s to her a reality in action which gets portrayed in a language when read evokes the reader’s consciousness. Oates is open to other minds, so possessed by them that in author’s note to them she says that the student who becomes the “Maureen Wendall” of the novel, “Her various problems and complexities overwhelmed me… My initial feeling about her life was, “This must be fiction, this can’t be real.” My more permanent feeling was, ‘this is the only kind of fiction that is real.’ Her ability to get occupied by another consciousness makes even them, her best novel to date, sometime an impenetrably voluminous history of emotion, emotions, emotions’. One gets the feeling that she is turning thousands of pages, that her world is harshly over-populated as a sleepless mind, that one cannot make out the individual features of anyone with this clamor of everyone’s existence. The social violence so marked in her work is like the sheer destiny of detail – this is what is happening to people. She is attached to life by well-founded apprehension that nothing in this world is permanent. In them, Maureen Wendall thinks:
“May be the book with her money in it, and the money so greedily saved, and the ideal of the money, may be these things weren’t real either. What would happen if everything broke into pieces? It was queer how you felt, instinctively, that a certain space of time was real and not a dream, and you gave your life to it, all your energy and faith, believing it to be real. But how could you tell what would last and what wouldn’t? Marriages ended. Love ended. Money could be stolen, found out and taken... or it might disappear by itself, like that secretary’s notebook. Objects disappeared, slipped through cracks, devoured, kicked aside, knocked under the bed or into the trash, lost. Her clearest memory of the men she’d been with was their moving away from her. They were all body then, completed.” (them, 321)

Oates’ trilogy resembles a card index of situations. They involve the reader through the author’s intense connection with her
material. She recognizes that each person as the center of the disturbance or violence. And this disturbance has its center and its circumference nowhere. Society speaks in them, but they are not articulate. They do not yet feel themselves to be emancipated persons. They are caught up in the social quagmire, compulsively and blindly. In a sense American life is taking the people by the throat: the violence, murder and every blood chilling incident are social avalanches. Unless the man learns to swim against the tide, she or he cannot survive. Learning to live in peace in this social avalanche requires retrospection, mental equilibrium and a right social consciousness with a strong mind in the concept of non-violence.

Oates is not attempting to focus her views or to change the counting social order to better a moralistic fable nor does she seem to superimpose order on the disordered world of which she writes. Her fiction attempts to raise the reader towards a new consciousness, which in turn will change chaos prevalent in the society. Oates believes in general, on educative and illustrative purpose of art. If any art failed to evoke human sympathy, ushering in order in the disorder, it is no art at all. Its purpose is to
lead the reader to a mere profound sense inculcating in him the values of human life. Her works show us how to get through and transcend pain. It encourages us to struggle in order to put some meaning in human life. Her works move into articulate moral position.

"Much of the power of Joyce Carol Oates’ fiction lies in her disturbing ability to identify and expose the fears we have deep within us." She explores two major fears. One is the individual’s fear of physical or emotional, which another person might inflict on him and the second is man’s secret fear of the consequences of a sudden eruption of the force, which lie within him, which he cannot understand or control.

Oates does not create any tragic heroes in the classical sense or traditional sense. The significance of her characters lies in their ability to survive. Robert H Fossum suggests that, "...importance she places on childhood, not only because the parent-child relationship typifies the conflict but because she believes that early experiences become internalized fatalities."
The evidence of this can be found in the lives of Jesse, Clara, Swan and Kathleen.

“…Violence is not characters’ only response. Retreats into somnolence, into gluttony designed as fortresses against fatality are almost equally common” as in *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

Oates’ fiction never fails to capture the emotional life of her characters, whether they are migrant workers or wealthy farmers, suburban executives or low class urbanities and evokes an overwhelming sense of those psychological pressures in American life. Oates’ fascination with depression stems from impotence and bewilderment, which are the characteristics of the period.

Oates’ range of fiction is a vast canvas, from Cherry River to mountains. It is at once the center of suicide and arm, the migrant locales, which breeds frustration and hatred. The suburban places throbs with neuroses and homicide, the metropolitan ambience with all its attendant inhumanities and injustice. It is a vast spectrum of human organism at micro level. In her, *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, the location is the glimpse of the social structure itself. The lives of the Walpole, is one, which has to be lived with
in the midst of fights and despair. The relationships often end with violence and murder. The continual suggestions of fragility and weakness, the metaphors of china and glassware, the hints of personalities shattering and breaking into pieces serve well to intensify the ambiance of violence in Joyce Carol Oates' fiction. She deftly sketches in the personalities of characters brought to the very brink of destruction and despair – all of which she skillfully works into her tales of unspeakable violence, with the effect of creating a fictive world in which violence inheres in even the most quotidian details. On occasions, she appears to mute the shocking effects of violence by draping the scenes in terms of magic. However, rather than muting the violence, the use of magic only dramatically points to its horror.

In what is perhaps one of the most horribly explicit scenes in all of Oates' fiction – Brock's shooting to death Loretta's boyfriend beside her in bed – she has Loretta muse in stunned wonderment that

"one shot had done it like magic" (them 38).
The following example proves the point.

Incomprehensible as that event is, Loretta can only grasp its significance when she thinks of it as magic: time seems stopped; the room becomes unfamiliar. The only way she can cope with the reality is to regard it initially as magic. Gradually, however, the realization of what has happened descends on her, and she must act. Her own sense of the unreality of the situation is reinforced by the fact that the one magical shot arouses no response in anyone else.

“Maybe a gunshot in the middle of the night wasn’t much of a surprise after all”

(them 37),

she reflects. In stunned bewilderment, the sixteen year old girl must try to get her wits together and handle the situation.

Young Richard Everett speaks ironically of magic in his tale. His sense of how certain things happened “magically” belies his childlike candor and points to a fierce cynicism. When he
introduces his parents into the narrative, his wry observation captures his love-hate attitude toward them: the love is magic, the hate, real. He writes,

“at these special times when we were together I thought I had somehow, magically, captured a man and a woman from an other land, foreign and exotic and not quite speaking my language, who were tamed by my power and love and who walked obediently after me. These were my true parents. The others – the dissatisfied Natashya Romanov, minor writer, and the blubbery breast beating executive Elwood Everett – were nothing but cruel step parents”.

Another time he describes his home as having at times a “certain soft magic, misty air”. When things are well between his parents and between the parents and him, the times are like a magical dream. Yet he is fully aware that nothing is magic, that the horror of his story, his descriptions of magical events and situations only serve to call greater attention to the violence and
chaos of his life. A departure from Oates’ straightforward, stranger than fiction “histories,” this novel parodies the creation of a novel. In so doing, those events and deeds of violence so horrifying in her other works are minimized and seemingly discredited. The underlying question of whether or not Richard actually murders his mother is never resolved and ultimately ceases to be a significant question.

With every greater irony, in them, Jules is described as a magician. As a youth, his “magic words” can make his companions perform anything he suggests. Even when it seems that nothing will ever be right in his life, he retains his belief in his magic touch. But as Maureen puzzles over his near-fatal shooting by Nadine, she comes to realize that there is no magic in America where “it wears out too quickly.” She equates magic with life, being, identity, “the mysterious substance of the eye,” and she is forced to conclude that it is a

“terrible cruelty, because it wears out. In America it wears out quickly” (them 410).
Magic cannot exist in her country – it is too easily killed off and destroyed.

Their dislocation is enforced by economic pressure. They do not have any sense of belonging. No community can come into existence, nor can it be created without some sense of strong roots. The roots are the consequence of American social disorder. In Oates' fiction in general and the trilogy in particular, there is no strong community mooring. The failure to create community in the city is an irrefutable fact for which multifarious reasons are advanced: heartless commercialism, ruthless competition, constant mobility, personal alienation, poverty, and crime. In his significant study of the city, *The Urban Wilderness*, Sam Bass Warner identified the three most cherished ideals of society as competition, community, and innovation. He asserts that community, the second goal, holds that a successful city should encompass a safe, healthy decent environment in which every man participates as a citizen, regardless of personal wealth or poverty, success or failure.

This basic need for community cannot be glossed over. The absence of a functioning community in large measure accounts for the modern sense of alienation. Nothing can substitute for
community, according to sociologist Robert Nisbet, nor can the quest itself be denied, for it springs from some of the powerful needs of human nature – need for a clear sense of cultural purpose, membership, status and continuity. Without these, no amount of mere material welfare will serve to arrest the developing sense of alienation in our society. So integral is the relationship between alienation and community that Norman Holmes Pearson sees the emphasis on the "agony of aloneness" in recent American literature as compelling evidence of the deeper yearning for community, a fact often overlooked in literary criticism. Too great a stress on a sense of alienation has tended to obscure the more significant experience of the need for community.

Self-identity is not possible without fraternity. Not only does the absence of community create a "nation of strangers," but even more basically it makes man a stranger to himself. In the introduction to his popular study of mobility, Vance Packard argues this point persuasively when he observes that the individual needs a sense of community. He needs it for the shaping of his own sense of identity. He needs it if he is to achieve a sense of self-esteem and well-being. The challenge is to achieve a
congenial balance between the individual's yearning for freedom and his urgent need for community and continuity. Community, Goodwin affirms, is the restraint that liberates. Man inhabits society and society inhabits him. So inextricably related are self-fulfilment and community that the failure to achieve the one is the failure to achieve the other.

The conflict between the need to establish community and the need for self-identity is mirrored in the corresponding tension between the interests of community and the dynamics of urban life. Throughout American literature ambivalent attitudes toward the city prevail. From the first fervor for a strongly knit community, the ideal rather quickly gets eroded by self-interest. Despite the good intentions of the settlers, it was not long before the city came to be considered alien to the ideal of community and to its formation and growth: this dual vision of the city as a setting conducive to community and as an inferno detrimental to human life is not unique to the American experience. Moreover, the transformation of the American city from the New Jerusalem to the urban wilderness was latent in the very foundings of the cities. No
sooner had towns and villages been set up than the movement away from the city began.

Defining modern tragedy as the loss of community, Oates examines the consequences of this loss throughout the pages of her fiction. One of the greatest detriments to the establishment of community is mobility, a constant moving about which militates against putting down roots and creating ties with other persons. Loretta Wendall’s ephemeral dream when she and Howard are first married that she would live happily forever in the house they are renting, speaks to this basic human need. She wants to stay put, to make friends, to have a permanent residence.

Mobility characterizes every Oates novel. In *A Garden of Earthly Delights* the most characteristic setting is hotel lobbies. A more appropriate setting for the mobile society than the very matrix of transiency, the hotel and motel, could be found. Karen and Shar live in hotels; they are constantly on the move once she leaves her father’s house to be with him. The hotel suggests symbolically the impermanence of their relationship; they will never make a home together. It will always be a passing thing.
Oates employs this setting with even greater poignancy in *Expensive People*. Early in his memoir, Richard Everett hints at his parents’ infidelity. Affairs of “business” are conducted in nearby hotels and motels. A second setting in *Expensive People* underlines the mobility of the society: airport terminals. Richard notes that his father has two brothers, one living in Italy, the second who, like his father, “was always being promoted and shoulder-tapped by other corporations, transferred and stolen and relocated back and forth across the country as if he were a precious jewel” (EP 24). The brothers rarely meet, and on one occasion he remembers that they had accidentally bumped into each other in the men’s lounge of an airport. On their way to the furthest ends of the United States, they encounter each other at Midway.

The mobility of the *Expensive People* is motivated by economic gains, which are coupled with a corresponding elevation in social status. Elwood’s promotions involve changing firms; he rises from OOP to GKS to BWK, names alone which suggest a mockery of system. The promotions also means his entering into better country clubs, invitations to better parties, and acquaintances of better people. Their social mobility brings them full circle: they
begin and end the round of moves in Cedar Grove, of course, moving into a much better home when they return to the suburb.

Constantly moving about, not by choice as the *Expensive People* can afford to do, the migrants of AGED must move merely to eat. The Walpoles are forced to hopscotch all over the country following the crops. There is no opportunity for them to settle down in one place, nor to stay in any camp for very long. Carleton, feeling the pressure of this constant moving, thinks that he does not love his first wife, Pearl, because: love was something you needed time for, your mind had to be at rest for it....” (GED 15). The demands of his growing family, the need to move on, season after season, not only diminishes the possibility of creating any sense of community with his fellow workers, but also destroys the possibility of a deep relationship with his wife.

Carleton muses once that no matter how urgently he might need to get home, he probably could not get there. Going back home is impossible because he has no home, Carleton realizes. His daughter, Clara, comes to this same awareness early in her life when she responds to the question of where she is from with “Not from nowhere.” There is no place she can call home, nowhere she
can be from. But the basic human need for belonging, for being rooted cannot be denied. Clara yearns for a home. After she has seduced Revere, she ponders what it is like to have her name on a barn, a symbol of possession and ownership, of rootedness. The big, bold letters of the Revere name painted on the barn are in sharp contrast with the backwards of the shanty in which she had once lived with her family.

For Clara, the humiliation of having no home comes up repeatedly. In school, which she rarely attends, she hears the word “house” and searches the reader for a picture to identify with the sound. The idea of a house, of a father in a white shirt and tie a mother playing with a baby are foreign to her – they are pictures in a book, sound in a reader, but not a part of her world. The unreality of all is accentuated by the fake clock in the picture, a timepiece with no hands. Deprived of these things, Clara is forced to lie as she does to Rosalie when she tells her she had been in a real house in Kentucky.

As there is no community support, there is no love and commitment to other members of the social organization. The result is that marriages fail to last long, familiarities are ephemeral
and friendships end in ingratitude. The individuals in the society fail to, create a community awareness and togetherness. Had they been created, definitely the whole ambit of the American society would have been different, possibly ameliorist one.

Oates transcends the barriers of feminism. Her ideal is greater than feminism and her commitment is larger than women’s issues. Her concern is humanity with humanism. Her aim is to correct the human foibles.

She takes it upon herself, with a missionary zeal, to show the real picture of the society, as it is in order to make the people see for themselves, thereby inculcating in them, an awareness to shun their violent way of life and take to constructive and progressive one. For that matter human life cannot become a bed of roses all through, everywhere or everyone at one stage or other will have to encounter certain upheavals. Every human being has to discern this natural order and try to live with it in a meaningful way, with adjustments suitable to environment and conditions. Only through an awareness of human values one may condition his or her mind to live an ideal life and by reshaping it to the betterment and wholesomeness. So Oates’ real concern reveals that she is
concerned with the total human problems and not the truncated feminist issues. She rather advocates for the self-determining women who alone can deal with the impending social condition and survive. Loretta Wendall in *them*, is an example of Oates' ideal human being. She is an invincible figure of matriarch who lives and faces turbulence of her life. She shapes her life despite all odds against her. It is Oates' message that in spite of all societal and communal odds still one can shape his or her life in an ameliorated manner. It is a pragmatic resolution.

Contrastingly Swan's life style in *A Garden of Earthly Delights* reveals his inability to withstand cultural imbalance, which makes him fail in his personal predicaments. So also is Richard in *Expensive People*. Oates' plots are addressed to social experiences and social milieu in which the individual is caught or becomes a pawn. Her text highlights the social enigma and the individuals' incapacity. Her concept of family is the resolution of individuals to imbibe goodness and kindness.

The underlying statement in the trilogy is - that's the way people live - about American society and about Man - the individual.
It is pertinent to quote Conrad who wrote in *Nostromo*:

"The wisdom of the heart having no concern with the erection or demolition of theories any more than with the defense of prejudices, has no random words at its command. The words it pronounces have the value of acts of integrity, tolerance and compassion."

Oates is a living phenomenon of this era with her forthright honesty in bringing to the fore the socio-cultural realities of the present American social structure. She dares to present the naked social realities without any fear or hesitation. Hence she shines gloriously in the domain of the American literature of the present era. She is an epoch and a watchtower of the American society. Though violence becomes a pivotal issue in Oates' novels, especially in her trilogy, her characters do not accept any personal defeat. They feel only dislocation and isolation. If they have a sense of belongingness, their lives would have been different and the very idea of violence would have a new identity. Through their indomitable spirit, Oates chronicles a new dawn of American culture which is devoid of violence. She sets a new stage of being and becoming in America.
The objective of any literature is to make us see beyond the present and to consolidate a future. The ability to see beyond is determined by our ability to discern the present in an absolute realistic terms with clarity and precision.

In much of her work, Oates takes a philosophical stand, trying to blend her interest in Eastern religious ideas about the unity of human beings with the traditional Western concept of individuality. Violence enters into her concerns because she cannot envision a change in human consciousness without radical action being taken. Thus Jules excitedly responds to the Indian author Vinoba Bhave: “We are all members of a single human family... My object is to transform the whole of society. Fire merely burns... Fire burns and does its duty. It is for others to do theirs.” Jules echoes these last words while putting a part of Detroit to the torch during the riot.

“History isn’t a natural sequence, it’s made by man. We create it. Man does and undoes everything.” This statement, made by one of her characters on the eve of the Detroit riot, is neither endorsed nor disowned by Oates, but it remains as part of the equation of change. The other part of the equation is nature, the
rhythms of repetition that make it difficult for a person to be himself or herself. In all of Oates’ novels, people struggle to express themselves in a culture that would coerce them into becoming an extension of itself.

“I try to write happy endings,” Oates confided in an early interview with Linda Kuehl, “but they seem to turn out in a kind of green light I didn’t imagine” (An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates, 309). What Oates’ endings have in common is the ambiguity of the implied future. In comments external to her texts, Oates may project her own optimism about her characters’ chances, but the odd green light at the conclusions of Oates’ family fiction confines the solutions of the problems it raises to the feminist unconscious, that revolutionary zone of the intersection of the restrictive and the possible. The potential of this alternative space, as well as its problems, is indicated in narratives of the “transgressive other.”
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END NOTES

1 Quoted in Contemporary Library Criticism. Vol.52, P.337


4 Carolyn Walker, P.59-60.